New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1954

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Boy Friend"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 1, 1954

First Nighters Hug 'The Boy Friend'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Vivienne Segal once said of a musical she was in that nobody liked it but the audiences. That may well be the fate of "The Boy Friend." Last night the audience bellowed its fool head off after the opening chorus.

That was a help to a nervous company. At the finale, the house was yelling just as loud. In between there were a few quiet times, and a show like this needs them.

"The Boy Friend" resurrects the typical musical comedy of the Twenties. It is not a satire, and it is never superior. It is a replica of what millions of people loved.

There is still a lot to be said for it.

The story is a boy-meet-girl formula, ending up with a masked ball. Despite its archaic archness and love of trite remarks, the show manages to be quite touching at times, because it is played so honestly.

Four-Girl Chorus Stars.

If there is a star, it is the four-girl chorus of harum-scarum finishing school girls, who prance and giggle their way through the show. They deliver their lines avidly out to the audience, speak in prissy unison, and wear bandeaus over their eyebrows and sashes over their thighs. Dior will never forgive them, for which let us be thankful.

The classic walk of the day is elbows in, hands out and pinkies up. There are more taps and high kicks here than Broadway has had in the past 15 years added together.

The music has beat and banjos. The hero and heroine look like Mary Eaton and Oscar Shaw. You won't believe this, but once he lifts her coyly to a footstool, and she whistles a chorus while he does his soft-shoe specialty!

Some Will Quibble.

The dialogue always sounds startled, and the tunes are dizzily close to old hits.

There will be quibblers, of course. Some will say it is too much of a good thing, and some that it has been done before. Well, it is a good thing, and what we have seen before, from "Billion Dollar Baby" to "Gents Prefer Blondes," was wildly satirical. The only times "The Boy Friend" loses its fun is when it tries too hard.

A handsome young English singer, Julie Andrews, lends the whole business a backbone by playing as if she believed each word and note. Opposite her, John Hewer is just intensely slap-happy enough.

Does a Hot Charleston.

The best-known American in this import is Bob Scheerer, whose dancing of the Charleston is as outstanding as his contemporary work in other shows.

"THE BOY FRIEND"

Musical comedy with book, lyrics and music by Sandy Wilson; staged by Vida Hope; choreography by John Heawood; scenery and costumes by Reginald Wooley; produced by Feuer and Martin at the Royale Theatre; September 30, 1954. The cast:

Hortense.....Paulette Girard
Nancy.....Millicent Martin
Maisie.....Ann Wakefield
Fay.....Stella Claire
Susanne.....Lyn Connorty
Dulcie.....Dilys Lay
Polly.....Julie Andrews
Pierre.....Jerry Newby
Alphonse.....Buddy Schwab
Marcel.....Joe Milan
Mme. Dubonnet....Ruth Altman
Bobby Van Heusen..Bob Scheerer
Percival Browne....Eric Berry
Tony.....John Hewer
Phillipe.....Jimmy Alex
Lord Brockhurst.....Geoffrey Hibbert
Lady Brockhurst..Moyna MacGill
Gendarme.....Douglas Deane
Guests..Phoebe Mackay, Marge Ellis, Mickey Calin
Waiter.....Lyn Robert

After three acts of "The Boy Friend" you walk out expecting newsboys to yell Extras about "Peaches Browning Sues Daddy" and "The Black Bottom Displaces the Charleston."

New York Post

October 1, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

Musical Comedy Hit From London

Unless my slight gifts as a prophet have failed me completely, the first hit of the season possessing smash proportions is "The Boy Friend," which opened last night at the Royale Theater. This is the English musical comedy which set out to capture the spirit, atmosphere and quality of the girl-and-music shows of the twenties, and is the work, in book, music and lyrics, of a versatile and talented British youth named Sandy Wilson, who probably wasn't even born in those debonair days. I think it is in every way a gay and engaging delight.

When I saw "The Boy Friend" in London last summer, I was in considerable doubt about its chances for a New York success. Fortunately, I gave myself an out. I said that the gift for showmanship possessed by Feuer and Martin, who were importing it, might provide the added touch that was required for local audiences. This is just what happened. By giving the American production an added skill and vitality and gathering together a rather more attractive cast than was playing it in the West End, they have made the show brighter and better than it seemed abroad.

The Heroine

One of the wisest things they did was to bring over a young actress named Julie Andrews to play the feminine lead. The heroine of "The Boy Friend" is the complete musical comedy ingenue of the twenties, pretty, simpering and a little vapid, and calling up memories of all the dream girls who brightened that slightly grotesque era for what used to be described as the tired business man. Miss Andrews has a wonderful capacity for kidding the inanities of the species without losing her romantic charm, and she is at once hilarious and enormously attractive.

Mr. Wilson and his associate, Vida Hope, who staged "The Boy Friend," say that their show is not a parody but a "pastiche," which means, I take it, that it is an effort to capture the authentic quality of the period and its musical comedies. To a great extent, this is what they have done, but, at least in the current production, the kidding is there, too. "The Boy Friend" pokes more than a little realistic fun at the poor old twenties, but it is an entirely sympathetic mockery. What is of primary importance, though, is that it is a most engaging show in all respects.

The Music

There is no doubt that Mr. Wilson is a skillful young man, and the skill is best revealed in the manner in which he got around the problems of his score. It was important that his songs should suggest the manner of such giants of the period as Rodgers and Hart, Vincent Youmans, Cole Porter and DeSylva, Brown and Henderson, and do it humorously and not too slavishly. I think he has managed it admirably. The songs are unquestionably reminiscent. But they have a pleasant charm of their own, and they succeed in being both amusing and engagingly tuneful.

Although Miss Andrews is the bright and triumphant star of the proceedings, the other players, chiefly English, have been admirably chosen. John Hewer, in the title role, is far better than the young man who had the assignment in London, and there are especially good semi-caricatures by Ann Wakefield, Dilys Lay, Eric Berry and Geoffrey Hibbert. The sets and costumes are perfect. It is possibly true that "The Boy Friend" is played more straight in London than in New York. But the local production has just the right combination of parody, nostalgia and candid paraphrase of a period, and it's a constant pleasure.

Daily Mirror

October 1, 1954

'The Boy Friend' a Laugh Riot at Royale Theatre

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Feuer and Martin brought a captivating satire on the intimate musical comedy of the 1920's to the Royale Theatre Thursday evening. Called "The Boy Friend," it has book, music and lyrics by the versatile Sandy Wilson. Originally preemed at London's Players Theatre, it was later moved to Wyndham's in the West End. There, it is in its 10th month—and a top ticket.

• • •

"THE BOY FRIEND" spoofs delightfully the wacky wardrobes and fluttery affections, the red hot hoofing and the untrammeled jazz of the flapper era. It kids the obvious sentiment and song cues, the vo-deo-dos and boop-boop-a-doops which were part of show-business until Rodgers and Hammerstein set a new pattern with "Oklahoma!"

True to the traditions of the good old days, it's in three acts. It tells one of those tales of romance and hijinks in a fashionable girls' finishing school on the French Riviera, circa 1926. It is calculated to make survivors of that period laugh uproariously at what they once considered sophisticated entertainment.

Those who have caught the London original tell us that Feuer and Martin have made an accurate transcription of it. With one exception. The orchestra has been expanded. They brought over Vida Hope to recreate her tongue-in-cheek stage direction, and John Heawood his vastly amusing choreography. And they have replicas of Reginald Wolley's gaudy and giddy sets and costumes.

• • •

THE CAST is part English and part American, a sort of hands-across-the-sea entente. And it's quite wonderful. Julie Andrews, 19, pretty and gifted, is sheer delight as the heroine. John Hewer, who looks a little like our own Jackie Cooper, is excellent as the hero. Ann Wakefield is fascinatingly droll as a popular date at the school.

Millicent Martin, Stella Claire and Dilys Lay are joys indeed, as three slap-happy students. Moyna MacGill, a really fine British actress, is having a sabbatical fling from the legit as the hero's aristocratic mother. Salutes are also due Ruth Altman, a distinguished light opera prima donna; Bob Scheerer, Eric Berry, Paulette Girard, Geoffrey Hibbert and Joe Milan in other roles.

Paul McGrane's Bearcats, under Anton Coppola's baton, really spark the vintage orchestrations by Ted Royal and Charles L. Cooke.

"The Boy Friend" must be accepted on its own terms. Take it for what it is, and you'll have a nostalgic, fun-packed evening. In our book, it's a laugh riot. The cleverest and most enjoyable lark we've relished in many a semester. In brief, it's terrific!

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

October 1, 1954

THEATER

'The Boy Friend'

By WALTER F. KERR

Polly With a Future

I HOPE that twenty or thirty years from now someone will be as nice to our musical comedies as "The Boy Friend" is to the wonderfully tinny triumphs of the twenties.

The very special virtue of the new spoof at the Royale is that it has taken one more look at the bobbing ankles, the bathing bandanas, and the bee-stung lips of a time gone by—and done it with open admiration, with unconcealed affection, with simple good humor, even with kindness. The pastiche that Sandy Wilson has written and composed, and that Vida Hope has directed, isn't really a parody at all. It's a romantic adolescent's love-letter to a girl in a cloche hat.

• • •

"The Boy Friend" doesn't bash at the harmless idiocies of an old-fashioned form, doesn't batter them to a pulp in the first five minutes. It sort of escorts them, fondly, across the stage. The finishing-school girls at the Villa Caprice in Nice mince prettily into view with their beribboned hat boxes and talk earnestly to one another—facing directly out front. Every one is absolutely stunned as every one else enters through a flowered archway—but they are discreetly stunned. A song cue sends a face-to-face couple circling the stage in opposite directions, and in great flowing swoops, before rejoining one another, and joining hands, for the first note. The chimes in the orchestra ring like teardrops as the lovely heroine, spotlighted in blue, murmurs her loved one's name.

• • •

And "The Boy Friend" has a treasure in that heroine. Her name is Polly, she is played by Julie Andrews, and any one who stopped dreaming with Mary Eaton can start dreaming again. Miss Andrews is perfect. With trembling upper lip, a blonde marcel, the largest amount of blue eye-shadow I have ever seen anywhere, and hands clasped winsomely just above her nice right knee, she breathes lunatic sincerity into this passage with her bellhop sweetheart:

"I'm afraid (he says, chastely lowering his head) I'm rather on my beam-ends."

"What a pity. And at carnival time, too!"

• • •

She is also sincere about song-cues. Her own singing voice has the piercing charm of an old family phonograph, and she has an attractive habit of pursing her teeth on the key consonant in each line of a lyric. But she is most dazzling when she is helping a fellow-player get ready for a ballad:

"That reminds me of a song I used to know."

"Can you sing it?"

"Yes."

And we are off into some gaily reminiscent approximations of tangos and fox-trots that ought to have had ukulele arrangements by Mae Singhi Breen: "I Could Be Happy With You," "A Room in Bloomsbury," "The You-Don't-Want-to-Play-with-Me Blues"—that sort of thing.

• • •

As choreographer John Heawood discovers an astonishing variety of high kicks, head twists, and shoulder dislocations with which to decorate the foolish score, quite a few other people make joyous minor contributions. Ann Wakefield grabs a sailor's hat from a genie in the wings to do what used to be called "the number with the boys." Ruth Altman, in the Irene Bordoni part, does a mellow—but still murderous—job on the woes of "Poor Little Pierette." John Hewer, a hero with wavy hair and a permanent grin, sidles lightly into soft-shoe-tap without warning, without reason, but with great good glee. Eric Berry, as a staid millionaire, agrees to snap his fingers politely the while he marks off a waltz. Bob Scheerer, one of the American members of this half-local, half-British cast, weaves out a Charleston that is almost too accomplished for a piece that is having fun with an antiquated period.

• • •

A few cautions for the querulous are in order. "The Boy Friend" inevitably hits its barren stretches. The evening is bound to be a one-joke affair, and its miracle is in being able to salvage the joke for so long; once in a while it does gasp for air. A couple of the underlings squeak a little oftener, and a little louder, than is necessary. And such salute as the show offers to the comedy teams of the twenties is inadequate. A rich and elderly couple do wander in from time to time, with jokes. But the jokes are neither good in their own right nor good as comment.

On the whole, though, I think you'll find "The Boy Friend" droll and delightful.

DAILY NEWS

October 1, 1954

'The Boy Friend' a Delightful Spoof On the Musicals of Good Old Days

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Sandy Wilson's musical, "The Boy Friend," is a happy, amiable and funny show, and it should do a great deal toward making peace between Britain and its rebellious colonies, the United States. We mustn't get mad at somebody who refuses to get mad at us, even when we were in our silly era of quick-made gin, the Charleston and girls' dresses which made girls look as though they were always crouching and slouching.

Wilson, an Englishman, has written a show about a time he never knew about—the jazz age of the 1920s. It was presented last evening at the Royale Theatre, and an exceptionally good audience had an exceptionally good time, if I am any judge of the difference between phony applause and real applause. I know I had an exceptionally good time.

It is not difficult to make fun of any period in the theatre, and in recent years we have had a few excellent burlesques of the Scott Fitzgerald era — to name one, Carol Channing's performance of the Gladiola Girl in "Touch and Go." What Sandy Wilson has done in "The Boy Friend" is not merely burlesquing and poking fun; he looks upon this boop-a-doop time we had—in London as well as here—with affection and a certain amount of respect.

A Disarming Book

The book of this show is a disarming mishmash of most of the musical comedy plots of the Twentieth Century. Rich girl loves poor boy. (Last evening the girl said, "I know he's only a messenger boy, but he's doing it because he's poor.") Poor boy thinks rich girl is poor girl. Poor boy turns out to be rich boy (this dates farther back, to Gilbert & Sullivan)—and love, of course, within the end. The end, in the case of "The Boy Friend," is a reprise by the whole company of a song which goes, as sloppily as a song can go, "I could be happy with you if you could be happy with me."

The players in "The Boy Friend," many of them English and some American, are quite an engaging lot. The chorus girls all look like Theda Bara and screech like crows. You have never seen so pure, so blonde and so blueeyed a heroine as Julie Andrews, who never steps out of character even when she is singing very well or being very funny. You should also enjoy the antics of a prohibition gamine, Ann Wakefield, and the scenic and comic attractions of Dilys Lay. And there could be no more pleasant dancing hero than Bob Scheerer.

Those Good Old Days

The sets and costumes of this little musical, by Reginald Woolley, are delightful. The dances, staged by John Heawood, are enchanting modern variants of old steps, including a fine tango, a quaint two-step and, of course, the Charleston. The songs are intelligent and humorous both musically and lyrically.

"The Boy Friend" makes me think that the musicals of the early 1920s weren't so bad. In those days all they did was try to entertain. They didn't have any messages and nobody ever died in them. The young lady who went to the theatre with me last evening wasn't born until the 1930s, but even so she had a delightful time reminiscing with Sandy Wilson about the good old days when heroes and heroines were innocent, jokes were plain jokes, dancers were hoofers and music had bounce.

The New York Times

October 1, 1954

Theatre: Old Musical Follies

'The Boy Friend' Bows at the Royale

By BROOKS ATKINSON

OUT of some clichés from the foolish Twenties, Sandy Wilson has written a delightful burlesque, "The Boy Friend," which opened at the Royale last evening. He wrote it originally for British audiences who have been enjoying it ever since.

There seems to be no reason why their American counterparts should not enjoy it here. For Mr. Wilson's light cartoon of the standard musical play of the Twenties is extremely well done in manuscript as well as on stage. He has written book, songs and lyrics with satirical inventiveness; and someone has directed it with great ironic skill.

•

For it is hard to say which is funnier: the material or the performance. With a covetous eye on the follies of the Twenties, Mr. Wilson has knocked together an old-fashioned book as maudlin as they were in those days. It tells the story of a rich little girl who falls in love with a charming messenger boy, who, fortunately, in the last act turns out to be the son of Lord and Lady Brockhurst.

Writing the music and lyrics in the same skimming, sardonic vein, Mr. Wilson has composed a tinny score in a jazzy style with amusingly innocuous lyrics.

I could be happy with you
If you could be happy with me,

his lovers sing with bogus rapture. Some other awful though plausible lines come across the footlights: "Skies will not always be blue," for example. Mr. Wilson has a knack for coating the obvious with humor.

•

The staging is superb. Dressed in the flapper, knee-length gowns of the Twenties, with cloche hats, and made up in the garish stage style of the period, the girls are grotesquely funny to look at before the show properly begins. But there is a lot more to the caricature than costumes. For the director has revived all the coy stage routines of the day, and they are hilarious.

The toothy charm, the girlish shrugs, the screeching laughter, the fraudulently innocent glee—they are all present or accounted for, the more horrible, the more uproarious. Was the musical stage as silly as this in the Twenties? Well, it was. We are all guilty, if only because we liked it that way.

According to the program, Vida Hope, who directed the London production, has directed the American facsimile. Since this department does not know all the details of the intramural rumpus during the rehearsal period, it will take the program at face value and give Miss Hope credit for a brisk, witty performance.

•

Many of the performers have come from England, and they are wonderful. The saucy girls who begin the festivities with squealing, grimacing and dancing are very funny. Ann Wakefield, who does a fast Charleston and flirts with all the boys, is vastly amusing. Dilys Lay, another pony soubrette, is a miniature Beatrice Lillie.

Ruth Altman, a Gothamite in good standing, plays and sings a breezy coquette of middle years. John Hewer, as a tap-dancing romantic lead, acts with the arch good nature of the period.

But it is probably Julie Andrews, as the heroine, who gives "The Boy Friend" its special quality. She burlesques the insipidity of the part. She keeps the romance very sad. Her hesitating gestures and her wistful, shy mannerisms are very comic. But, by golly, there is more than irony in her performance. There is something genuine in it, too. Sometimes her romantic sadness is almost moving. One theatregoer found himself sorry for her and just on the verge of believing "The Boy Friend"; and he was happier than she was when she found Prince Charming in the last buttery scene.

But that is obviously an illegal attitude to take towards Mr. Wilson's pastiche. "The Boy Friend" is a caricature of the hokum musical comedy of the Twenties, and a mighty good one, too.